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## Before Going to War

Memory can be kind. My memory tells me I was the best player on the best ball team I ever played on. It was a company softball team when I was in the Army, stationed at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, in 1966, not long before I was sent to Vietnam. My memory does not recall the name of a single other player on the team, which company I was in, or our won-lost record. I do remember clearly, however, that every game was about Vietnam.

On the last day of basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, I had waited with a mixture of nervousness and expectation of disappointment as each soldier in my company was handed a manila envelope that would tell him where he would go. Advanced Infantry Training? Artillery training? Or some specialized training. Lyndon Johnson was president and I and my fellow trainees, both the enlisted and, like me, the drafted, weren't quite certain what to expect. We knew we were part of a buildup activated by Johnson's decision to send more than 100,000 additional Americans to Vietnam. We were, I think, all apprehensive because we could be sent off to war. That's not the same as saying none of us wanted to go. Some people thrive on situations that make them nervous. Nervousness can be a magnet, like waiting to ride on a roller coaster, like pretending every time you have sex is the first time. It sweetens the experience. For me, and I suspect for others, there was also an expectation of disappointment. I had so often been disappointed in myself. My grades in high school. My grades in college. My inability to make the high school basketball team. My inability to become a regular on my college baseball team. My failure to convince anyone I could be a writer, a real, published writer. Mostly, my inability to convince a girl, any girl, I would make a good boyfriend. I was 21, had

had fewer than a dozen dates, and had not had a girlfriend. My life, in the things that seemed most important, was dominated by disappointment.

A captain called out names and when yours was called you walked to a lieutenant who handed you a manila envelope. When my name was called and I stepped up to the lieutenant, a tall, thin man who could not have been more than two or three years older than me, he opened my envelope, slid out some papers, glanced at them, said, "Too bad," slid the papers back in, and handed me the envelope. I had never liked him, he had never liked me, and I realized Too Bad meant I was not being sent to Vietnam to have my ass blown to shreds. I walked away so he could not see my reaction to my assignment. The one fellow trainee I had developed a friendship with in basic walked up and asked me where I was going, I looked at the papers in the envelope. Fort Monmouth, I told him. In New Jersey. I had never heard of the fort. I was to receive six months electronics training in something called long lines carrier equipment. My friend was going to advanced infantry training. He was the only college graduate in our platoon, wanted to be an actor, had once attended a party that Lauren Bacall also attended, and read short excerpts from the Bible every day. Like me he often dispassionately criticized the war. Infantry? I asked. How did that happen? He had told me he might volunteer for the infantry. That would give him some emotional experience he could draw on years later when acting. When he told me that I thought he was joking, I thought it was an attempt at a witty response to my comment that going to war wouldn't be such a bad thing for me, would give me something to write about. Now he said he didn't know how it happened. His scores on Army entrance tests were OK, he said. That, I understood, meant he was disappointed in them. He added he once spoke to the lieutenant, the one neither of us liked, about the possibility of volunteering for the infantry. Maybe that did it. A possibility spoken can be a wish expressed. I told that to my friend. We all left Fort Jackson that day and I never saw him again.

Later I found out the training I was to receive at Fort Monmouth usually required a four-year enlistment. Volunteering for the Air Force, Navy, Marines, or Coast Guard required a four-year commitment, but joining the army then usually meant only three years. Draftees, regardless of the branch of service, went in for two years. Some army specialties, however, meant four years, and long lines electronics training was one of them. At Monmouth nearly everyone attending classes with me told me how lucky I was. Drafted for two years and get this high level training. I accepted a small pride in that. Later I was told I got the assignment because I had done so well in the mathematics part of the Army entrance exam. I had in fact done better in the math part than in the verbal part. That worried me. I didn't want to

be a mathematician. I wanted to be a writer. Didn't a higher score in math than in words mean something bad? Shit.

The electronics classes bored me. I had less interest in them than I had in my studies in college, a lack of interest that led to bad grades, that in turn led to academic suspension, that led to me dangling in society, depression, uncertainty about my future—uncertainty, more accurately, about my present—and finally making a decision to volunteer for the draft. That would give me something to do for two years. Just about then Lyndon Johnson announced Americans would go beyond being advisors in Vietnam. They would fight the war.

I arrived at Fort Monmouth in January, 1966, and did little to stand out until a sergeant overheard me tell another private that Johnson had made a mistake. He screamed at me, the way sergeants do in bad movies; maybe he learned to be a sergeant by watching bad movies. He said he was sick and god damned tired of my anti-American rhetoric. He used the word rhetoric four or five times, as often as he used profanity in his heated rhetoric directed at my face. I didn't attempt to answer, partly because you only get yourself in trouble by explaining anything when you're a private and the man screaming at you is a sergeant. But the larger part was that I knew, and he must not have known, he was setting himself up for dozens of snide comments from the two dozen privates who heard his screaming. Later they would tell me he was a jerk, an ass, a fuckbrain, and a dozen other bad things. Really bad things. That part is usually left out of the bad movies. Another time I was placing a piece of electronic equipment on a work table to practice repairing it, and a lieutenant said I shouldn't put it down with the plugs facing down, something I wasn't going to do until he told me not to do it, so then I did it. He yelled at me, "Didn't you hear me?" Of course I heard him. I didn't say anything. I repositioned the gray metal block.

I earned, wanted to earn, a reputation as a mild rebel. Not openly enough rebellious to invite real retribution, but just rebellious enough to annoy sergeants and lieutenants. A half dozen times I was told to keep my views about Vietnam to myself.

In late February a note appeared on the company bulletin board saying a company softball team was being formed and anyone who wanted to play on it should attend a meeting. A date, time, and location were listed. I attended. Fifteen or 20 ballplayers sat on the grass outside the company barracks. A lieutenant stood to the side. A sheet to sign moved through the sitting ballplayers. A sergeant, the coach, spoke. He said we would have only one practice before the first game. He

told us where and when the practice would be. When the signup sheet was handed to me, I saw we were supposed to make a note about our ball playing experience. One guy had been the catcher for Boston College. Several had played high school ball. Some wrote things like, I've played a lot, or Sandlot, or Back in Indiana. One guy, a sergeant, wrote that he played minor league ball in the Florida League. One season. I wrote I had played on the baseball team at Wilkes College.

Three days before the scheduled practice I was told I would have KP in three days. At the time I thought the lieutenant who didn't like the way I laid down the piece of equipment arranged that. Now I think it was just the normal rotation. Whatever. I missed practice. I knew having a single practice meant starting lineups would be determined there.

A week after that was the first game. I showed up early and spoke to the sergeant-coach, told him I missed the practice because of KP. I hoped he would say he would watch me during warm-ups and make a decision about whether I would play after that. Instead, he said he already had his starting lineup. Picked it out at the practice.

The other team was using the field for 15 minutes. When they were done, all of our players had arrived, and the coach sent his starting lineup out for fielding practice. He told me to pick out a position and go to it. I went to shortstop. The starter was awkward, his throws to first wide, and he grunted when he threw. I stepped in, the coach hit a grounder to my left, I ran over, scooped it up easily, fired hard to first. The throw was straight, like a tight clothes line, and ended in the first baseman's glove right in front of his chest. Two more grounders, the same results. When we ran off the field, the coach asked me, "You the one who played college ball in Pennsylvania?" Then some players were lined up to play pepper. They needed someone to hit the ball to them, so I went over, picked up a bat, and took a stance. Four players were lined up. I hit the first lobbed pitch to the first in line. The second to the second in line. The third to the third in line. I kept that up for 20 or more lobbed pitches. The coach was watching. Meanwhile the starters were taking batting practice. The coach called my name and said, "Take a few quick swings." I moved to home plate, carrying the same bat, and a medium speed pitch about belt high came in and I ripped the bat through it. The ball lined just to the left of the third basemen, who stuck his glove out. The ball knocked his glove off. Mostly that was because he was too nonchalant, as players often are during practice. But also I had hit the ball very hard. On the second pitch I hit a long high drive to centerfield. No one out there was paying attention. It was not a game, after all. The ball sailed over the head of the two guys chatting in centerfield. If they had been paying attention, it would have been a routine fly ball. But it didn't matter.

Bat control, power, a strong throwing arm, smooth fielding. The coach said to me, "You're starting at short and batting third." He added, "Don't make me look stupid." I said nothing.

We were the visiting team. The other team's pitcher hid the ball behind his body until the last nano-second prior to delivery. Our lead off hitter struck out on three called strikes. He never batted leadoff again. The second batter hit a weak fly ball that dropped between the left fielder and third baseman. I stepped to the plate, looked at the coach-sergeant in the third base coach's box, saw him give me a bunt sign, and I then looked at the left fielder, who was in a few steps more than he had been for the first two batters, probably because of the ball that fell in front of him with the last batter. I positioned myself, saw a fast ball coming, straight, a little above belt high, and I stepped into it, opened my hip, and swung as hard as I could, with the slight uppercut Ted Williams had advised. I made solid contact and the ball soared high and far, straight over the left fielder's head, and I ran as fast as I could—I was always a slow runner—around first, around second, and as I was halfway to third the coach-sergeant called to me to slow down. "You can walk home." As I approached second I had seen the ball continue to roll and the left fielder chasing after it. I slowed down rounding third, slapped the coach-sergeant's outstretched hand, and trotted home. Other players slapped my butt and shoulder and said congratulatory inanities. At the end of the half inning, the coach-sergeant ran to me and said, "I gave you the bunt sign." I said, "You did?" He slapped me on the shoulder and said, "Forget about it." A lieutenant stood about 10 feet away glaring at me. Fuck him.

I don't remember losing any games during the regular season, although my memory might be wrong. I remember hitting a home run about every other game, getting hits at least half the times I came to bat, making a diving catch of a line drive to my left, and once running behind third base to make a shoe-high catch of a blooper right on the left field line. I remember that the coach changed first basemen about half-way through the season. A new player had joined the team, a big, always happy guy from somewhere in the West who fielded smoothly and hit a lot of long fly balls that were caught. The new first baseman had a habit of moving slowly to first when there was a ground ball hit to an infielder and doing that with his back to the fielder. Most times he reached first in time to turn around and take the throw. One time, however, there was a very hard hit grounder to my right that I backhanded and I threw very quickly and very hard to first. Only after I had released the ball did I realize the first baseman was just stepping on the bag, with his back towards the playing field. My throw smacked into his ass, and he said

something like, “Huh,” turned, saw the ball on the ground in front of him, and picked it up. His foot was on the bag and the batter was out by at least five steps. Not even close. The next half inning, sitting on the bench, the first baseman leaned forward and reached back to rub his ass, and looking at me he said, “Man, I won’t be able to sit down for a week.” But, of course, he was sitting down and it was a joke. Someone said, “You didn’t feel that with all the padding you got.” After the game the coach-sergeant said the lieutenant, who came to watch all the games, asked him why I was the starting shortstop if I didn’t know I should look to see if the first baseman was in place yet. He said he told the lieutenant I did what I was supposed to do, that the problem was with the first baseman not positioning himself quickly enough. Then he said, “He doesn’t like you.” I didn’t respond, and he added, “Says you mouth off about the war.” I didn’t reply to that either.

Classes consisted of lectures and hands on work with electronics equipment. We started with the basics of electronics. What is electricity? How is it harnessed? Atoms, molecules, waves. Much of what we were taught seemed like elementary physics. We were taught basic wiring skills. How to solder a wire. How to read a schematic. Those who had joined for four years for this training seemed intense. They talked of doing it for the rest of the lives. They would not be mere electricians, they insisted. They would be electronics specialists. Those of us, a minority, who were draftees tended to offer mild ridicule. At one point a classroom instructor, an easy going sergeant, drew a diagram on the board of a bunch of atoms bombarding another atom. I forget the point, but I remember Tom Carlyle, a fellow draftee, said, “Just like a gang bang.” The whole class laughed, including the sergeant, but the sergeant clearly didn’t know gang bang was a sexual term, and his ignorance prolonged our laughter.

I became friendly with about a half dozen fellow students. All were draftees. One was Rufus Whitfield from Harlem. I became friendly with him by accident. I went into a barracks room in the same building as the large room I shared with at least 50 guys and asked for someone who I didn’t know. A guy who might have a glove to sell that I could use on the softball team. I had been borrowing gloves for every game. I asked a few guys if they were so and so, all said no. One said, No, I’m Rufus, and I said, You sound like a character in a Jimmy Baldwin novel. He said, Jimmy Baldwin, do you know him personally, and I said, I’ve read a half dozen books by him, that’s the same thing. After that Rufus and I would talk once or twice a week about literature or movies or art. Rufus was a short muscular guy with no talent as an athlete. He was generally sophisticated, or at least as sophisticated as soldiers in

their early 20's can be, but he had a crude habit of mildly dirty comments. Once he said he liked the way his girlfriend giggled when he blew into her anus.

I also became friendly with Steve Mackin, a polite, mild spoken white guy from Selma, Alabama, the scene of some of the most famous efforts by white police to suppress black civil rights marches in the early 60's. Steve usually picked up the tab for the first round of beers at the enlisted men's club. If there was only one roll left in the basket on the table at chow, he always insisted someone else take it. He once gave me his last cigarette to smoke. He was a bigot. He was as friendly and generous with blacks as he was with whites, but if no blacks were around, he never hesitated to say they were dumb, they smelled, they were lazy. He insisted when I or some other white guy challenged him that he was not being racist, that he was only citing facts.

Rufus and Steve were assigned to the same 50-plus man room, but they didn't know each other. I had classes with each of them, and I would go to the EM club with each of them, or sit at the same table during chow with each of them, but never at the same time. Steve never objected if a black sat at his table, but he would never sit down if a black was at the table first. I mentioned this to him once and he said it wasn't so, said I was imagining things.

Steve taught me something about bigotry. Until I met him, I was familiar only with the bigots of movies and TV shows. They had thick necks and carried baseball bats. They spewed hatred in their very appearance. A few were respectable businessmen or political leaders who allowed the thick neck ones to get away with their violence. Steve taught me bigots could not only be ordinary and indistinguishable from anyone else, but that they could be nice guys. Steve was polite, generous, easy going, kind. And a bigot.

I was never together with Steve and Rufus at the same time. I talked to Tom about that one time, and he said Steve was clearly wrong for his views, but then he added that, Of course, God is punishing blacks for their sins, that's why their skin is so dark. I said something like, That's crap, and he said I could read about it in holy books. I'm far from an expert on the contents of holy books, so I asked him to cite a passage. He said there were passages in the writings of Joseph Smith. I did not immediately recognize the name Joseph Smith, although I had read about him. But then Tom added that a careful reading of the Book of Mormon "revealed the same truths." Oh, that Joseph Smith. This was 1966, 12 years before the Mormon church would allow blacks to hold the priesthood (something all good white Mormon men could do since the church was founded in 1830). But Tom had no patience

with whatever challenges I offered. It was true because divinely inspired writings said it was true.

Tom, Steve, Rufus, everyone I became friendly with did not have strong feelings about the war in Vietnam. Some days they thought it was justified, other days they thought it was wrong. After Fort Monmouth I lost touch with Rufus, and I don't know what happened to him. Steve and I roomed together in Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon, and he was so easy-going that he wouldn't disagree with me when I criticized Lyndon Johnson or our country's war policies. He would quickly agree with me when I criticized army life. Tom was stationed somewhere north of Saigon, and I ran into him only once while in Vietnam, when we were both on Tu Du Street, a favorite hangout for Americans. By then he had decided the United States shouldn't be in the war. None of my three friends were interested in playing on the softball team, and all three were uninterested in anything I reported about the games I played in.

In the spring of 1966, while still at Fort Monmouth, my opposition to the war was intellectual, lacking almost totally in emotional content, in passion, and that meant it lacked conviction. Massive demonstrations against the war were still a year away. Newspaper editorials finding fault with the war were matched, at least equally, by those supporting it. The country still largely supported Lyndon Johnson and his war. I would sometimes tell a fellow private that the United States could get bogged down, or that we were better off fighting communism with ideas and foreign aid and good deeds than with bullets, or the money spent in Vietnam would better be spent on helping to end poverty in the U.S. Steve and Rufus seemed, at most, bemused by my comments. Tom sometimes argued with me. The arguments were always friendly. A sergeant, an instructor, sometimes snapped at me to study electronics, practice electronics, learn electronics. And stop the anti-American shit talk, he once said. Then, as now, I tended to carry a book around with me to read in idle moments. At one point I was carrying *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe, a paperback copy with a photograph of a scantily clad Kim Novak on the front cover, a scene from a recently released movie based on the novel. The sergeant picked it up one day, looked at the cover, and said, You're not allowed to read anti-American pornography on a military base. I said, It's a classic. He looked at the back cover, looked at some pages in the front, and flipped it on to the table. Then he walked away. Another time he said, You're on your company's softball team? When I said I was, he said he was in the other league. I hadn't known there was a second league. There's a playoff at the end of the season, he said. At the time I didn't attach any significance to that, but later I realized he knew my team was likely to finish first

in our league and he probably meant his team was likely to finish first in his league. In fact, we would play against each other in the last game I ever played at Fort Monmouth.

Meanwhile, there were other games to play. In one game, near the end of the season, near the end of my time at Fort Monmouth, the opposing team had a pitcher who was very fast. Very, very fast. Since softball pitchers are throwing from 45 feet away, not the 60 feet, six inches, of baseball pitchers, there's even less time to get your bat around. He struck out our first two batters on three pitches each, even though his pitches were straight and in the middle of the strike zone. Neither batter could get his bat around. I had studied him while the first two batters stood at the plate. Standing in the on deck circle, I took a batter's stance, and psychologically adjusted to his speed. I had faced faster pitchers in college and on the semi-pro team I played on. I stepped to the plate, took my stance, and suddenly a pitch was headed at my head. I had no trouble getting out of the way, but I realized the pitcher was ready for me. He pitched me a message. I could play mind games too. I stepped back into the batter's box, fidgeted, so I would look a little nervous, and when the next pitch came straight down the middle—he evidently had only two pitches, a fat fastball and a brush back—I hitched, stepped into it, and tore the bat through the center of the strike zone. A line drive shot at the third baseman's head, and he wasn't ready for it. His glove went up in a protective reaction gesture, and the ball hit the edge of his glove, knocking it from his hand. By the time he recovered, I was too close to first base for him to attempt a throw. The next batter popped up and the inning was over. Our pitcher, the sergeant who had played minor league ball, was the better pitcher. He had a curve, could throw the ball on the inside or outside edge of the strike zone, and varied his speeds. He was as fast as the other pitcher and had a deceiving, effective changeup. But the other team had two singles off of him, neither hit well. When I came to bat a second time in the fourth inning, I had been the only base runner for our team. This time I had a long, high drive to deep center. Too high. The centerfielder had to go back a dozen steps or more, but other than that it was a routine running catch. Still, I felt good. The game was scoreless and I knew I could hit this pitcher hard. The game remained scoreless until the seventh and final inning. When I came to bat this time, the scorekeeper for our team called out my name and said, "You've got our only hit. Get a second."

A routine call of encouragement, but it angered the scorekeeper from the other team, who stood and yelled, "Like fuck he has a hit. None of you suckers have a hit. You assholes are being no-hit." Three or four other players on their bench loudly agreed with him. The pitcher stepped away from the rubber and looked at

his own scorekeeper. He didn't say anything. Our scorekeeper stepped several steps away from the bench, towards the other scorekeeper. They were shouting at each other, arguing about whether my line drive off the third baseman's glove in the first inning was a hit or error. Suddenly they were charging at each other, behind the back stop. Our sergeant-coach ran after our scorekeeper, ordering him to stop, and at least two men from the other team's bench ran after their scorekeeper. The two scorekeepers stopped a step or two short of each other, shouted things at each other—I'm not sure what they said because so many other people were yelling at them now—and after less than a minute, several players from each team stood between the two scorekeepers, using their bodies to keep them apart. After another minute or so everyone headed back to their benches. There was now an unanticipated silence from both teams. The players in the field did not shout their normal encouragements to their pitcher to strike out the batter, and the players on our team didn't shout their normal encouragements to the batter, me, to hit the hell out of the ball. Maybe it was the silence, maybe it was the near-fistfight between the two scorekeepers, maybe it was being at my final at bat in what might be a no hit game, but whatever the reason, I felt uneasy. Far more so then when the pitcher brushed me back in the first inning. That was faux nervousness. This time it wasn't so much nervousness as it was a sense of displacement. I had lost my concentration on the game. I stepped into the batter's box and immediately stepped out and took a deep breath. That seemed to help, so I stepped back in. The first pitch was the usual, fat and straight, and I let it pass. The umpire called a strike. Unexpectedly, that focused me. I was a swinger. I thought of myself like Yogi Berra and Roberto Clemente, a batter who didn't want any pitch to pass him. Swing at anything you can reach. The next pitch was the same, and I hit it hard, and it shot off my bat and into left center field, between the two outfielders, and rolled by them. I rounded first and coming into second saw that the centerfielder had reached the ball and was turning to throw it to third. A player with more confidence in his running speed probably would have had an easy shot at a triple, but I stopped at second. Our scorekeeper called out to the other team's scorekeeper, "You gonna call that one an error too, shithead?" The next batter, the ex-catcher from Boston College hit a sharp single to left and I easily scored. In the bottom of the inning, our pitcher struck out two and the final batter hit a weak grounder to shortstop, to me, and the game was over.

We ended the season first in our league. There would be playoff games. We won the first two and had to play two more to win the base championship. Meanwhile, I had received orders telling me I was being sent to Kessler Air Force Base in Biloxi,

Mississippi, for three weeks additional training in electronics, and then I would get a month's leave, and then I would go to Vietnam. I had assumed for months I would end up in Vietnam, and when I read my orders I had little emotional reaction. No, I didn't want to get my ass blown apart. Yes, I did look forward to having some experiences I could write about. I had not yet read *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway, but I knew about it, I knew Hemingway had gone to war and come back and became a great writer. Like many young writers, I made a connection between going to war and having something to write about. There wasn't ambivalence or confusion in my emotions about going to Vietnam. I was like most young Americans then, and, I think, now. We're accustomed to doing what we're told. You play the position the coach tells you play; you sit on the bench if he tells you to sit on the bench. You're part of a team, you're told over and over, and team players win games. Still, I had swung away—and hit a home run—in my first at bat on my company team, in defiance of an order to bunt. I had acted as an individual and succeeded. But it was a private success, even a sneaky success. I hadn't told anyone what I did. A small lie and I helped the team, and that's all the team cared about. As long as I didn't announce my rebellion, I was safe. That was the lesson: rebel, and if you succeed and keep your rebellion quiet, everyone's happy. Even then it was clear to me there was a national parallel. Anyone who avoided the draft by enrolling in college or divinity school or allowing a well-connected parent to say quiet things to influential people didn't anger most Americans who supported the war. Their anger was reserved for those who marched in the streets, burned draft cards, or fled to Canada.

I would take a Greyhound bus to New Orleans, spend a night there, and the following morning report to Kessler AFB. My bus would leave the day of the final game. My last game at Fort Monmouth would be two days before that. If we won that game, the final game, the one I would miss, would be for the base championship.

The next to last game was at a field we hadn't played on previously. The pitcher for the other team was the sergeant who had asked me if I played on my company softball team. A sergeant who had made it clear he didn't like me because I didn't think the U.S. should be in Vietnam. We were the visiting team, so we batted first. The first two batters grounded out. I watched the pitcher, the sergeant, and knew his fastest pitch was medium speed, that he could move the ball around to different spots, but there was nothing in his delivery that would challenge me. I stepped into the batter's box, extended my bat to touch the outside of the plate, straightened up, and went into my normal stance, a right-handed imitation of the

left-handed Duke Snider, the great Brooklyn Dodger centerfielder of the previous decade. The first pitch was at my head, faster than anything he had thrown to the first two batters. I stepped back and avoided it easily, but I was surprised. Was that a deliberate brush back or did the ball just get away from him? I stepped back into the box, this time a few inches closer to the plate, a message that I could not be intimidated. The second pitch was as fast as the first and behind me, the place you throw the ball when you really want to hit the batter, not just scare him, because his instinct is to back away, which is what I did, also turning away from the pitch, and it slammed into my upper arm. The pain was instant, but I wouldn't grimace or rub it, wouldn't let the bastard know he hurt me. I glared at him and saw he was running at me. My first instinct was that he wanted to fight, but then I realized he was saying, "You OK? Slipped out the side of my hand. You OK?" He rubbed my shoulder. "I'm fine," I said, uncertain if his caring was an act. I started to trot to first base, and he muttered, "Hippie." A few minutes were needed for me to understand his meaning. Like everyone else in the army I had close-cropped hair. It was just a general association. Hippies, as I interpreted his meaning, were against the war and I was against the war, so I was a hippie. The behind my back pitch was deliberate.

When I next came to bat we were ahead by two runs. The first pitch to me was inside, clearly intended to be a brush back, but I had anticipated that and stepped back as he released the ball, and swung and pulled a hard liner right down the third base line. It landed inches within the line about a hundred feet past the third baseman, and by the time the left fielder had retrieved it I was well around second base and easily made it to third. I scored on a sacrifice fly. I got a single my third time up. And when I was at short a sharply hit grounder to our pitcher's left, and to the right field side of second base looked like a sure hit, but I managed to get to it deep behind the base, scoop it up and throw out the runner. When the game was over, we had won and I had played well, and I looked for the opposing pitcher. I saw him helping his teammates pack their bats and other gear into two duffel bags, and I stared. He glanced over and then away. I hoped he saw me glaring. But even if he didn't, I knew he wouldn't want to make eye contact with me, and that made me feel good.

The day of the final game, I sat on a Greyhound bus on the base when our first basemen, the one I had hit in the ass with a throw, came up to the bus, saw me inside, motioned for me to open the window, and told me our team had lost. By one run. "Wish you were there," he said.

"Yeah. Me, too." Then the bus left.

Riding the bus from New Jersey to New Orleans I thought about both playing ball and going to Vietnam. And not having a girlfriend, and flunking out of college, and, I suppose, although my memory does not support this, a thousand other things. Growing up in Exeter, Pennsylvania, I had assumed—not hoped for, assumed—I would become a major league baseball player. In Little League, on a semipro team I played for, in pickup games I was the best player on the team. Not until I played on the college team, at Wilkes College in Wilkes-Barre, did I have a coach who didn't make me a regular, who didn't have me bat third or fourth in the lineup. The assistant coach tried to talk to the coach into starting me, but he didn't succeed. Some of the other players told me I should be starting, but they didn't make the decision. I never had a conversation with that coach, Rollie Schmidt, but I did hear him once tell someone he coached baseball only because his contract required him to coach two sports. He was the football coach, and, he said, he didn't even like baseball. And, I thought in a self-serving analysis, he didn't know baseball. Didn't know baseball talent. Three times major league scouts had expressed a small interest in me. One from the St. Louis Cardinals, one from the Philadelphia Phillies, one from the Pittsburgh Pirates. Not much of an interest. They watched me play in a semipro game or someplace else and asked me to show up at a local tryout. They told me the date, time, place. Each time there were dozens of other players there, all, like me, I suppose, at least mildly talented. They never actually watched us play. They timed us running, had us throw the ball, hit us some fly balls and grounders. Made notes on our height and weight. We did, each time, play a makeshift game, and everyone got to hit, but it wasn't a real game. The scout from the Cardinals told me I was OK in most areas, but not good enough in any to overcome my slowness. You're a really slow runner, he said. The scouts from the Pirates and Phillies didn't say anything to me, other than to tell me and almost everyone else who showed up for the tryout, Thanks for coming, I would not be a professional baseball player and now I was going to Vietnam, and they seemed like the same thing. I had never dreamed of being a soldier. I didn't like being a soldier. I didn't mind going to Vietnam. I just didn't like the army. Having to wear a uniform, keep my hair cut short, take orders from sergeants and lieutenants and captains who didn't seem very bright. But going to Vietnam, that wouldn't be so bad, mostly because I could envision myself coming home and telling girls I was a war veteran. Not nearly as good as saying I'm a major league baseball player, but the best substitute I had available. Looking out the window of the bus as it rushed through the countrysides and towns and cities of the Carolinas and Georgia and Alabama and Mississippi, the most I had until then seen of America, I felt deep

sadness, deep disappointment in surrendering my dream of playing before tens of thousands of cheering fans. Disappointment in my genetic makeup for not making me a faster runner, in American society for not honoring the promise of its feel-good movies—all you need is to want something strongly enough and, by god, you'll get it—and, mostly, disappointment in myself. One more item on my young life's list of failures: instead of playing ball for the Cardinals or Pirates or Phillies I was going to Vietnam. People I knew back at Wilkes College who were better students than me were still there. I was going to Vietnam. As I watched through the window of the bus, as I watched America pass by me, I realized a great, discomfoting truth: Only losers went to Vietnam.

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**MARTIN NAPARSTECK'S** latest book is *The Trial of Susan B. Anthony* and is published by McFarland. He resides in Rochester, New York.